Senator Hillary Clinton
AIPAC Policy Conference speech
June 4, 2008

Thank you. It is wonderful being here with all of you among so many friends and I feel like this is a giant family reunion, the largest AIPAC gathering in history and I feel like I am among family. And thank you for the warm welcome.

I want to thank my friend, Lonnie Kaplan for his leadership and that introduction. I also want to thank Howard Friedman for his leadership as President and to congratulate David Victor on his Election. And I want to commend Howard Kohr, AIPAC's distinguished Board of Directors, and all of the AIPAC staff, who work so hard every day all year round. And I particularly want to acknowledge the many students in the audience from around the country--the future of AIPAC and the US Israel relationship.

I want to pay tribute to one member of the AIPAC family and my very good friend who is not with us this year, Congressman Tom Lantos. Tom bore witness to worst of human cruelty and devoted his life to stopping it. He taught us to stand up for what's right even when it's hard, especially when it's hard, and we will always cherish his memory and his wonderful family will always be in our hearts.

And finally I want to thank all of you for coming to Washington, DC once again to stand strong with Israel and to strengthen that special bond between our countries. Being here today I am reminded of a passage in Isaiah, upon your walls oh Jerusalem I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent . Just like the sentinels of old, you are never silent; you never grow weary and you never stop standing up for and fighting for Israel.

Now I know there are some who say you shouldn't be here, who say speaking up for a strong American Israeli relationship is somehow at odds with America's interests. Well I believe that speaking up for a strong American Israeli relationship is essential to our interests and I reject --I reject that our common commitment to Israel's survival and well-being is not in the best interest of the United States of America. I think you not only have a right to stand up for what you believe in; you have a responsibility as Americans to do so. You are acting in the highest American tradition, exercising a right enshrined in our Constitution, the right to petition your government and I applaud you for it.

Of course I am privileged to represent one of the largest Jewish constituencies in the world. Is there anyone from New York even here in this audience today? I know you'll be talking to your members of Congress this week, but you won't need to ask me where I stand because you already know the answer; I stand with you and for you. The United States and Israel have an incredible bond as allies, friends--as partners. We have shared interests; we have shared ideals and these are not just common values. They are our core values-- freedom, democracy, human rights, women's rights, a robust civil society, and we stand with Israel because Israel demonstrates that democracy can flourish in the most difficult conditions because its very existence is a stinging rebuke to hatred and the Holocaust, because in defeating terror, Israel's cause is our cause and because Israel's struggle is a struggle not just for the Jewish people but for all people who want to live in peace and security under a democratically elected government.

President Harry Truman certainly understood the importance of Israel. He recognized the new nation just 11-minutes after David Ben Gurion read the Proclamation of Independence. So it is with joy and some sense of relief that we celebrate the 60th anniversary of that day and for all of the trials and tears, what a remarkable 60 years it has been. From my first trip to Israel in 1982 to my most recent I have seen firsthand what Israel has achieved--the desert is blooming again and we can be so proud of the role that America has played in this success. Every American President since Truman has recognized the special relationship and has made it stronger. Israel is stronger because of us and because of you. But even as we celebrate these achievements we know the work is far from over; Israel is not yet safe. The values that Israel represents are not yet secure. Our hearts go out in particular to the courageous citizens of cities like Sderot and Ashkelon who live in fear that a rocket will fall on their homes or their children's schools at any moment. I have seen these security challenges firsthand. In 2002 I went to the Sbarro Pizzeria with then President Olmert just a few weeks after that tragic suicide bombing there. I visited with victims of terrorism in the Hadassah Hospital. I've been to Gilo and seen the security fence protecting Israeli families from attacks in their own homes. And I've stood up and spoken out for their right to have that protective fence. And as a--as a Senator from New York who has talked way too much I've seen the tragic toll of terrorism of 9/11 here at home as well. My support for Israel does not come recently or lightly; I know it is right in my head, in my heart, and in my gut. And that is exactly the commitment we need in our next President, a Democratic President because the Democratic Party's strong commitment to the State of Israel since the days of Harry Truman endorsed today; it is one of our Party's most cherished values and it will continue under the next Democratic President.

I know--I know Senator Obama understands what is at stake here; it has been an honor to contest these Primaries with him. It is an honor to call him my friend and let me be very clear. I know that Senator Obama will be a good friend to Israel. I know that Senator Obama shares my view that the next President must be ready to say to the world, America's position is unchanging; our resolve unyielding; our stance non-negotiable. The United States stands with Israel now and forever.

And let me underscore that I believe we need a Democrat in the White House next January because it is not just Israel that faces challenges in the 21st Century. America does too. The next President will inherit grave problems, difficult threats, a War in Afghanistan and a War in Iraq. America's reputation at an all-time low, the continued threat of terrorism at home and abroad; President Bush has moved us in the wrong direction. For all the strong rhetoric you heard from Senator McCain on Monday he will continue the same failed policies in Iraq and weaken our security making the Middle East a more dangerous place. America needs a new beginning in our foreign policy to make our country stronger and frankly to make our position in the world more credible, to give us the strategic leverage back that we have lost over the last seven years. We cannot stand strongly with Israel if we are not strong at home and if we are not respected and considered strong and the leader of the world everywhere else.

We have a rare moment of opportunity to change America's course and restore our standing in the world. And we must seize this moment by leading our friends and allies in building the world we want rather than simply defending against a world we fear. We must build a world that will be safer, more prosperous, and more just. I believe security and opportunity go hand-in-hand. When children have hope, a real belief that there is opportunity ahead for them, we help to dry up the swamp of fear and pessimism that breeds terrorism. That means supporting education--not just for boys but for girls too. It also means that real economic opportunity can't grow where there is no security and that opportunity alone is not enough to overcome extremism. I have been very specific about how I would make this new foreign policy vision that I share and I think many of you do as well--a reality.

Today I want to lay out three principles that I hope will guide us in all that we do with Israel and why it is important to put that relationship into the broader context of what foreign policy is in the best interest of the United States.

First, I have a bedrock commitment to Israel's security because Israel's security is critical to our security. When Islamic extremists including the leaders of nations proclaim death to America, death to Israel, we understand that our two nations are fighting a shared threat, and those of us in this room know this bond is so much more personal than any security agreement or risk assessment. We know a shared threat can also mean shared sorrow. When eight young men were killed in a Jerusalem Yeshiva in March including a 16 year-old American named Abraham David Moses, we were united in our grief. So I strongly support Israel's right to self-defense. Israel has both the right and the obligation to defend its citizens and I believe America should aid in that defense.

I am proud to support the $2.5 billion in security assistance for Israel in the Foreign Aid Bill and I am committed to making sure that Israel maintains a military edge to meet increasing threats. Part of our commitment as real security is a commitment to the Israeli Palestinian peace process. I'm deeply moved by the legacies of so many leaders who have sacrificed so much in the quest for peace, like my friend Yitzhak Rabin and the warrior, Ariel Sharon, who is in our thoughts and prayers.

We must support Israel in making the tough choices for peace, and I believe that US diplomacy is critical to making progress and consistent US involvement can lower the level of violence and restore our credibility in the region. We need to talk to all sides but all parties must know we will always stand with Israel in its struggle for peace and security. Israel should know that the United States will never pressure her to make unilateral concessions or to impose a made in America solution.

11:19:04 Palestinians will need to do their part by renouncing violence and teaching their children the ways of peace and tolerance. We must show the Palestinians and the moderate Arabs that the path of reconciliation is better than the terrorist road to self-destruction. I am deeply concerned about the growing threat in Gaza. Hamas has built a military force equipped with sophisticated weapons from Iran. Hamas' campaign of terror has claimed the lives of hundreds of innocent Israeli s; its charter calls for the destruction of Israel. It has shown no commitment to peace or to renouncing violence, so we must be clear about how we feel about our next President negotiating directly with Hamas. Here's how I feel; until Hamas renounces terrorism and recognizes Israel negotiating with Hamas is unacceptable for the United States.

And we must continue to demand a return of the Israeli soldiers captured by Hamas and by Hezbollah, Ehud Goldwasser, Eldad Regev, Gilad Shalit--I've been privileged to know Karnit Goldwasser, Ehud's wife and I was proud to sponsor the Resolution that passed the Senate calling for their immediate release. I will not stop fighting and pressing for these soldiers to come home until they finally are safely home with the families that are waiting for them.

The second principle is simple one; no nuclear weapons for Iran. Iran is a country whose leaders, whose President denies the Holocaust. He defies the international community. His government trains, funds, and arms Hamas and Hezbollah terrorists in attacking Israeli civilians. He threatens to destroy Israel; just this week he said that Israel is about to die and will soon be erased. We can never let Iran obtain nuclear weapons. The next President will have to deal with the Iranian challenge from day one. This is not just in Israel's interest; it is in America's interest and the world's interest and this is a threat that I take very seriously. I'm a co-sponsor of the Iran Nonproliferation Act. I support calling the Iranian Revolutionary Guard what it is--a terrorist organization.

I have also said that should Iran ever--ever contemplate using nuclear weapons against Israel they must understand what the consequences will be to them. But we must do everything in our power to prevent such an unthinkable day from ever happening and the best way to do that is to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons in the first place. We should start by developing an international consensus against Iran's nuclear program, with a set of tougher sanctions if Iran continues to defy the international community. We should also work with Israel and moderate Arab neighbors to roll-back Iran's influence in that region. If the Iranian government wants to become a responsible member of the international community we would wholeheartedly welcome that change. But Iran simply cannot be allowed to continue its current behavior and I wish to underscore, I believe that we are further behind in constraining Iran today because of the failed policies of President Bush than we would have been had we taken a much more aggressive engagement course earlier. That is why it is imperative that we get both tough and smart about dealing with Iran before it is too late.

Now my third principle is standing up against hatred and anti- Semitism wherever it is found and it's not only Israeli s and Jews who need to be speaking out against anti-Semitism; it is every fair thinking person who understands that it directly affects you as well.

I have spoken out for years against anti-Semitism in Palestinian schools. I'm appalled still today that Palestinian textbooks reject Israel's right to exist and describe Israel's founding as a catastrophe that is unprecedented in history. That is not education; it is indoctrination. We also know that the Saudis have textbooks describing Jews as wicked and we were all revolted when Iran's President held a conference to deny the Holocaust. But our vigilance against anti-Semitism must go beyond the Middle East. It must receive no corridor anywhere in the world. The next President will face a test of resolve on this issue at the 2009 Durbin Conference, also called Durbin Two. I will never forget how the world's first Conference against Racism became a mockery of itself when it descended into anti-Semitism and hatred. The debacle at Durbin must never be repeated. We should take very strong action to insure anti-Semitism is kept off the agenda at Durbin Two and if those efforts fail I believe the United States should boycott that Conference.

The challenge of fighting anti-Semitism is indeed great, but we know it is possible to change hearts and minds. We saw it recently when the Magen David Adom was finally included in the international Red Cross after years of being singled out for being Israeli . On one of my trips to Israel I met an MDA member named Nathan, an Ethiopian Jew who had saved many innocent lives when he tackled a terrorist carrying explosives. It was a miracle that Nathan had survived. His valor was extraordinary and it was just what you would expect from a member of the MDA. That's why I was so proud to take up the MDA's cause, sponsoring legislation and speaking out and I was very pleased as all of us were when the International Red Cross righted this historic wrong. On a personal level, I was honored when Nathan accepted my invitation to come to New York and walk with me in our Salute to Israel parade. In a way we are still walking together and the image of this very dignified Ethiopian Jew now an Israeli walking in that parade down 5th Avenue bearing the scars of his heroic rescue effort to prevent the terrorists from destroying more lives was one that I will carry with me my entire life because that was really Israel. It wasn't just everyone on the sides of the street waving but it was this--was this proud young man who had kept Jewish traditions alive as a long string of those for centuries who had done so, and who had finally come home to Israel and had given so much to protect the country that had given him a new life.

So while it can be easy to be discouraged when we look at the challenges ahead, we can never lose our resolve and never give up hope. What gives me not just hope but the underlying reality that can be delivered by those who work together is that the power of the values we share with Israel are such an unshakable and unbreakable bond. And the difference that America can make is so critical. Let me leave you with just this glimpse of why America matters and why AIPAC matters.

In her memoir, one of my personal heroines, Golda Meir, wrote about the wonderful moment 60 years ago when Israel joined the family of nations and America stood at her side. Here's what she wrote: a few minutes after midnight my phone rang. It had been ringing all evening as I ran to answer it I wondered what bad news I would hear now. Doesn't that sound familiar? But the voice at the other end of the phone sounded jubilant. Golda, are you listening? Truman has recognized us. I can't remember what I said or did but I remember how I felt. It was like a miracle and I was filled with joy and relief. That was the decision that one American President made, to be there for Israel at a time of need. That is the decision that the next President must be ready to make as well. To the members of AIPAC just know that your cause is just, your voice is strong; Washington, and the world, is listening, so go forth and speak up for what you know is right.

Thank you; God bless you; God bless Israel and God bless America. Thank you all very much.